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Urgent call to prevent late stage presentation of head and neck cancer

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Urgent Call to Action in Preventing Late-Stage Head and Neck Cancer Presentation

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed significant strain on primary care medical and dental services. Consultations have moved to a primarily telemedicine service with limited face to face contact. General practitioners were initially advised not to examine the oral cavity unless deemed essential.¹ In the UK dental sector, over 14 million appointments were missed in the UK in 2020.² Although routine dentistry has now resumed, emergencies are still being prioritised and fewer patients are seen per session.³

Pre-COVID-19, head and neck cancer was already a disease that presented late with 62% of cases diagnosed at stage III or IV. Unsurprisingly, more advanced disease is linked with greater morbidity and mortality. It is of deep concern that access to both primary medical and dental services is currently limited as patients with head and neck cancer will be missing life-saving opportunities for detection. One United States study in May 2020 reported a 25% reduction in newly diagnosed head and neck malignancy and the median primary tumour size was statistically significantly larger.⁴ Similar evidence was observed in Turin, Italy, during their March 2020 lockdown when they received significantly fewer urgent referrals and diagnosed only 12% of predicted head and neck oncology caseload.⁵

Given the decline in prevalence of COVID-19 in the community, the successful implementation of the UK vaccination programme and the ongoing use of Personal Protective Equipment, we believe it is time for the medical profession (especially primary care clinicians) to recommence examining the oral cavity face to face. Likewise, there is a growing public health need to encourage patients to book routine check-ups with their dentist. That is because, as well as detecting cancer, inspection of the oral cavity is often a prognostic indicator for general health. Telemedicine is suboptimal for inspection of this complex area. Head and neck cancer is a ticking time bomb which will require the union of medical and dental specialities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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